

Christmas Grace...answers how?

Titus 2:11-14

Intro. Did you ever wonder how the first Christians viewed the birth of Christ? Did they celebrate the event the way we do? Aside from the shepherd's wonder and the magi's worship, there's not a single Christmas celebration in the NT. In fact, Christmas wasn't celebrated in any organized way until the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine. History has Christmas first celebrated on December 25th in 336 AD. It was a one day event that usually involved a feast. But ever since that time, Christmas has grown like a snowball rolling down hill. From a day-long event, the celebration is now season long and a growth industry with no end in sight. Even though many celebrate in ignorance, it's as though our hearts tell us something really big happened to trigger all this.

But as the early churches were established, not a word is said about Christmas parties or programs! There's no mention of an Easter celebration either. That's because the apostles and first Christians didn't compartmentalize the life of Jesus in chapters and segments. They viewed His life collectively as one event. They blended His birth / the hidden years / his public ministry / and His death, resurrection, and ascension into one event they referred to as, "**the appearing of Jesus Christ.**" The word **appearing** is translated from a Greek word that sounds similar to our English word, *epiphany*. Here are some verses that speak of this manifestation or revealing of Christ:

- **1 Tim. 3:16** combines the incarnation and life of Jesus this way...**Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body...** Another example is...
- **2 Tim. 1:9b, 10** - **This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.** This same summary of Christ's earthly life is found in...
- **Heb. 9:26b** - **But now He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself.**
- Since Jesus is **the way, the truth and the life**, we know who John was talking about when he wrote, **The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.** – 1 John 1:2

So this is what the NT reveals. Rather than separating His life into chapters, the first Christians viewed the whole scope of Christ's time on earth as **His appearing**. With this in mind, I want you to see our text. **Titus 2:11 - For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.**

1. Grace revealed - The first coming of Jesus or **His appearing** is described in **Titus 2:11** as the *appearing of God's grace*. In other words, with respect to God's grace, the curtain was lifted when Jesus **appeared**. **Grace appearing** when Jesus arrived is like saying, "*a winning tradition arrived when Jim Harbaugh came to be the head football coach at U of M.*" (at least, many hope it did!)

Along with love, **grace** is a primary attribute of God. When the Lord appeared to Moses, **Ex. 34:6, 7** says, **And He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.** Before everything else that is true of God, He chose to reveal Himself as **compassionate and gracious**. This separates the God of the Bible from the imaginary gods of the heathen who are anything but compassionate and gracious. The gods of paganism are selfish, demanding, angry and vengeful.

In fact, last week I saw a FB post by Franklin Graham that says, *"In Islam you have to die for Allah. The God I worship died for me!"*

In the NT, this primary attribute of God describes Christmas and the appearing of Jesus. **Jn. 1:14 - The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.** A few verses later, **vs.16, 17** say, **From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.** We found this again in **2 Tim.1:9, 10 - This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus...** Then too, the phrase, **the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ**, is found about 20x's in the NT. So throughout the NT the appearing of Jesus is vitally connected to this amazing and wonderful attribute of divine grace. When Jesus came, the grace of God appeared in a new and dynamic way!

But over the years I've observed something. Among the many words associated with Christmas, the word, **grace** is seldom included. If you survey our traditional Christmas carols and greeting cards, I think you'll find this is true. While not deliberate, this omission is unfortunate because the NT so frequently connects the appearing of Jesus with the dynamic arrival of God's grace. For example, **II Cor. 8:9** says, **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** The fact that Jesus became poor for our sakes, is a clear reference to His Incarnation.

2. Grace defined - Let's zero in on the meaning of this attribute called **the grace of God**. Last time we found that God's love answers the WHY of Christmas. God's love explains why Jesus came to earth. His love answers WHY the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. His love answers WHY God sent His one and only Son to earth to suffer and die for us. To all these questions, the Bible has but one answer. **Jn. 3:16** says, **For God so loved the world...** We hear it again in **I Jn. 4:9 - This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.**

Because **God is love**, He devised a plan to save us and bring us to Himself. His plan, conceived before creation, involved sending His Son to deliver us from our lost and sinful condition. The angel sent to Joseph to explain Mary's pregnancy and how he should respond to it, said... **"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins."** - **Matt. 1:21** The name Jesus means *Jehovah saves*. So this enormous annual pause called Christmas is really a celebration of God's love shown the world when God sent His Son to live among us. If you ever doubt God's love for you...consider the manger and the cross. Like the twin towers of a suspension bridge, these two events prove that God loves us. The bridge itself is the only route from death to life and earth to heaven. Jesus is the way...the way of grace. So Christmas love answers the question WHY. And judging from the size of the party, the whole world knows about it. What excuse can there be for celebrating Christmas without acknowledging why Jesus came?

The next question we might ask about Christmas is HOW? God's salvation plan was motivated by His love. But HOW or on what basis did God accomplish this? HOW could God pardon / forgive / and save people who continuously prove we are sinners and unworthy of Him? Did He simply disregard our crimes and authorize a prisoner release program? Did He lower the bar to allow even the worst of us to meet His righteous standards? Of course He didn't! His righteousness is inflexible and unchanging. His justice demands vindication. Sin must be punished. The Lord made this clear in the less-quoted part of **Ex. 34:6, 7**. We read the first part earlier, but notice the end of **v. 7...Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."**

God would be inconsistent with His own holy and righteous character if He swept our sinfulness under the carpet. He has warned us all that a day of reckoning is coming...a time when every human being will stand before Him in judgment. The tension between God's love and His holy determination to punish sin is resolved by one word...**grace**. In pure grace God provided the righteousness we could never attain by keeping His rules. What law could never legislate, God's grace made possible. The salvation our performance could never earn, He offered as a free gift. This wonderful gospel of grace was the heartbeat of Paul who wrote, **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. - Titus 2:11**

But what is meant by this term, **grace**? Along with God's kind of love, the world knows little of His grace. To many, the actual concept of **grace** is like some of the Russian words I've thrown at you. We don't speak that language around here. But the way we define grace is very important. A noted NT professor, J Greshem Machen, wrote this, "*The very center and core of the whole Bible is the doctrine of the grace of God.*" Let me take that a step further...Grace is the most important concept in the Bible, to Christianity, and the entire world! Because God's grace is so vast and unfamiliar, a lifetime is needed to wrap our minds around it! If *karma* is getting what we earn or deserve, grace is the opposite...it's getting what we don't deserve. Being saved by grace is like coming to a Christmas party empty-handed but walking away with God's greatest gift.

Because of our sin, the Bible says we were spiritually dead and unresponsive to God. Before we trust Christ we were like prisoners on death row waiting for execution of the penalty we know we deserve. Most of the world rejects this diagnosis, but this is what God says was true about us. Around here, we believe God's Word is more trustworthy than our own! Am I still right about that? But as we found last time, **1 Jn. 4:9** explains that God's love was shown by Jesus who was sent to deliver us from death and bring us into life. **This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.**

While **grace** is something we urgently need, grace is not about us. Grace is fundamentally a word about God. *Grace is God's un-coerced initiative and extravagant demonstrations of concern and favor.* Grace is God's love in action. It's something God freely provides and urges us to accept and learn to rest in. But grace is fundamentally a word about God. Michael Horton writes, "*In grace, God gives nothing less than Himself. Grace, then, is not a third thing or substance mediating between God and sinners, but is Jesus Christ in redeeming action.*"

Now here's a question...When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, what did Lazarus contribute to the miracle? The answer...NOTHING! Now remember, Lazarus had assumed room temperature. He had been dead for four days. Jesus didn't enter his tomb and ask Lazarus to do anything. He didn't say, "*Okay friend, if you move a finger, I'll do the rest. If you'll blink an eye, I'll know you really want to be raised.*" *If you promise to follow Me more closely, I'll raise you. I'm not asking for much, but you have to something!*" NO! Lazarus had nothing to do with his resurrection from death to life. By raising Lazarus, Jesus proved He has the power to raise the dead just as He said in **Jn.11:25, 26**. And this power operates by grace, not works. You see, grace isn't about us...it's fundamentally about God. It's God giving and doing for sinful people what we don't deserve to have Him do. It's His love in action.

Speaking to believers about their pre-salvation life, **Eph. 2:1** says, **you were dead in your transgressions and sins**. The passage goes on to say, **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.** – **Eph. 2:4, 5** God is the One who makes dead sinners alive. Because salvation is of grace and entirely God's doing, He alone gets the glory. **Eph. 2:8, 9** says, **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.**

If our own efforts had anything at all to do with our salvation, we'd strut around heaven taking selfies and boasting like proud peacocks. But God's grace-way of saving eliminates all boasting. The focus of heaven is the Lamb upon His throne. Here's what some men of God have written about grace:

- *"Grace is free sovereign favor to the ill-deserving."* - B.B. Warfield
- *"Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues."* - John Stott
- *"Grace is God reaching downward to people who are in rebellion against Him."* – Jerry Bridges
- *"Grace is unconditional love toward a person who does not deserve it."* Paul Zahl

So love answers WHY God sent His Son to save us. But grace answers HOW or on what basis God saves us. He saves by grace and grace alone. Yet many people try to add something to grace. They attach strings to God's gift...strings of works or faithfulness or dedication or something else. In the extreme, they blow themselves up. They feel the need to contribute something. So many seem unable to believe salvation is entirely free as the Bible declares it to be. Others emphasize grace but live as though salvation is little more than a cheap ticket into heaven. They take Titus 2:11 but ignore the verses that follow. Listen...even though salvation is a free gift, it's anything but cheap! God paid a terrible price to save us. When received, this great salvation will result in a changed life.

Our desperate need of grace and salvation's tremendous cost is stated clearly in **Rom. 3:20-26**. I wish we had time to really unpack these verses, but the clock only allows only brief comment. **But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed before-hand unpunished--he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.**

Notice, a **righteousness from God** has been made known. This is another way of saying **the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men**. This **righteousness from God** is offered as a free gift. This is the Good News...the Gospel. Though this righteousness is available to everyone, it's received **only through faith in Jesus Christ**. It's for **all who believe**. Again, we're reminded that God justifies us **freely by His grace**. Someone described salvation this way, *"God set the price and met the price."* He demands righteousness. After life under the Law proved our inability to stop sinning / make us righteous / or attain salvation by our best efforts...God stooped down / paid the penalty for our sinfulness / and offered righteousness as a free gift to all who would receive it by faith. This is what is meant by **grace**. And the embodiment of grace is Jesus Christ who appeared that first Christmas. As Michael Horton wrote, *"Grace, then, is not a third thing or substance mediating between God and sinners, but is Jesus Christ in redeeming action."*

3. Grace received - Have you ever found yourself in the awkward position of knowing you should be more grateful for a gift than you're actually feeling? I mean, you're just not feeling it. You actually feel some guilt for not feeling more grateful! In a moment like this, we put on a happy face and overstate our appreciation. But it rings hollow. We fake it and heap more guilt on ourselves for being such a faker. Even the muscles in our face betray us. Our smile feels disingenuous like our face is trying too hard. Have you been there and done that, or is it just me?

We might find ourselves in this uncomfortable situation when we don't have the foggiest idea what the gift is or what it does. It's a "what's it" or a "thing-a-ma-jig"...a QVC marvel that came with a second one thrown in to sweeten the deal! You suspect yours is the second one.

Or maybe the gift has value that isn't apparent. It's a rare treasure from the Ming Dynasty but it looks like a ceramic snagged at a garage sale or Dollar Store. We may also find ourselves in this position when the giver doesn't realize we already have one and have no use for another. This happens all the time with wedding gifts that have to be returned or regifted. (Regifting?...who would ever do that?) But truthfully, how many lava lamps does a couple need for a happy marriage? (Ask Tom Rench how many popcorn machines he has. Tom refuses to say he likes popcorn out of fear that somebody will give him another popper!) Pretended gratitude also shows up when a gift, for a variety of reasons, isn't wanted. I mean, you could have bought the item for yourself but decided you didn't want pink flamingos on your front lawn! I'm thinking even the most thankful among us have struggled with this at one time or another.

But this much I know for sure...every human being struggles to understand and respond adequately to the grace of God. In church, we talk grace all the time. We confidently affirm that *"salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone."* The Bible affirms our *standing in grace* and the *sufficiency* of God's grace. Along with Paul we say, *by God's grace I am what I am. (I Cor. 15:10)* When someone asks *"How are you?"*...we've learned to say, *"Better than I deserve."* But do we really get it? Have we really embraced this unearthly concept in all of its facets and fullness? I'm sure I haven't! Down here *"you get what you pay for"* and *"there are no free lunches."* But in sharp contrast to the way things operate around us, the God above provided salvation on the basis of grace alone.

Like Christmas love we spoke about last Sunday, Christmas grace is immeasurable. God's grace is always greater than our sinfulness. **(Rom. 5:20)** Despite a lifetime of learning and experience, I often find myself feeling I should be more appreciative...more thankful...more responsive. Are you with me in this? My praise should be more heartfelt and my witness and service should be more earnest. But the truth is...we're just not feeling it. So at times, we find ourselves going through motions that are expected of us as Christians...but our hearts aren't in it. We then feel guilty that our response to God's grace isn't more spontaneous and sincere. Can I tell you something? God knows this about us. His grace isn't based on our gratefulness. But that shouldn't keep us from growing in grace.

Like the person with the unidentified gift from QVC, the Samaritan woman of **Jn. 4** didn't know what the gift was. When Jesus first approached her, she didn't respond the way she should have because she had no idea what gift Jesus had to give her. So Jesus said... **"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."** - v.10. Many people are just like this woman...they don't realize God has a priceless gift He's eager to give them. And listen...God doesn't offer the gift C.O.D, with batteries and assembly required, or taxes owed. He offers salvation as a gift that was "Paid in Full." Just receive it.

Others don't respond to Christmas grace because they don't realize the value of the gifts God offers the world. **I Cor. 1:18** says, **For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.** Many fail to see value in the Gospel. To many, the message of a man dying on a cross is **foolishness**...just another religious fable and a bloody one at that. Karl Marx wrote, *"Religion is the opiate of the masses."* He believed religion is a drug that changes nothing...but an anesthetic people can't seem to live without. Many feel that way about Christianity...they feel it's a crutch. They don't see the value in Jesus Christ.

Still others fail to respond appropriately to Christmas grace because of what they already have. They have religion and morality. Their hands are full though their hearts are empty. The closets of their heart contain a legacy of community service and good deeds. They've pacified any concern about eternity by believing it's just an extension of the here and now. Besides, they're better than average and not as bad as the worst. They're plugged into some spiritual outlet that keeps them busy and self-satisfied. They don't need God to do what they feel confident they can do for themselves.

They're proud of who they are and believe God surely thinks well of them because of all they do. They don't receive Christmas grace because they don't feel they need it.

Remember the Pharisee at the Temple? **Lk. 18:11, 12** says, **The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'** Did this guy have any appreciation for God's grace? I don't think so. He approached God on the basis of his own goodness and religious duties. He was full of himself and felt no need for grace. It was the tax collector who was humbled by his sin...the man despised by the Pharisee...who went away justified. **(v.14)**

Christians can slide into this same self-satisfied attitude when we take our eyes off Christ and begin to think more highly of ourselves than we should. It can happen as we begin to pat ourselves on the back for our years of service / our separation / our zeal / our dedication to kingdom work. We can actually deceive ourselves into thinking we've outgrown the need for God's grace. We know this happens because Jesus confronted believers in this condition at the church of Laodicea. He said, **You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. - Rev. 3:17** There's no greater miscalculation than for any of us to think we're all that and need nothing from God.

But going back to the illustration, there is one other situation that causes people to be unresponsive to the grace of God. It's that pink flamingo situation...that situation where a person for whatever reason, decides they don't want God's grace. The French Nobel Prize winning philosopher Albert Camus resisted God his whole life. He died having not received God's grace. He heard the Gospel and believed it was right to live a moral life. But along life's way Camus confessed he was miserable. He realized living a moral life is impossible apart from God. But rather than turn to God for grace to save Him and help him live as he should, he said "*no thank you*" to God. He refused to allow Christ in his belief system. He shut Christ out. By resisting Christ, he cut himself off from the grace God offers everyone.

The answer to the WHY of Christmas is God's love. Though the word may not appear often enough in our carols and cards, the HOW of Christmas is grace. Grace is God's love in action. It's God patiently stooping down to reach us and bring the fallen to Himself. It's God giving us what we could never earn or deserve. Christmas then and now is all about the *epiphany*, the **appearing of Jesus Christ**. And with the appearing of Jesus, God's grace appeared in a fresh and dynamic way. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men**. As we consider the enormity of this celebration gone "viral", it's as though the human heart senses something really big happened that first Christmas night. Light shined out of darkness. Something out of the ordinary and spectacular appeared. To the unbeliever we say, listen to your heart and listen to God. With the birth of Jesus, God's grace appeared.

Like every other gift offered, Jesus Christ must be personally received. We receive God's gift by confessing our sin and our need of Him. Then in simple faith, we must believe He will save us when we ask Him to. So we thank Him. At this point grace comes full circle. When we receive the gift God has given with no strings attached, the only reasonable response is to offer our lives freely to Him.